

LOCAL

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A life of peace

A priest lives a contemplative existence as he counsels others and works hard for the ecology



RAY SMITH/TIMES COLONIST

Charles Brandt: Hermit whose life is rich, despite some loneliness.

Times Colonist staff
BLACK CREEK

THE NARROW TRACK that winds through the woods to Charles Brandt's home reflects the past 35 years of this Roman Catholic priest's life: simple, yet intricately winding, overwhelmingly peaceful — and worth the trip.

Brandt, who has lived for almost three decades on the banks of the Oyster River in this small community north of Courtenay, is an internationally known environmentalist who earns his keep as a book conservator.

He's also a hermit, whose status is officially recognized and protected under the canon law of the Catholic church following a ceremony last November.

The ceremony, conducted by Bishop Remi de Roo of the Diocese of Victoria, ended more than 30 years of canonical legal limbo for the former Anglican priest, who came to Vancouver Island in 1964 to join a colony of hermits on the Tsolem River.

Brandt, who at 75 looks a generation younger, had been at a monastery in Iowa before coming to B.C. He sought to join the colony being established by Benedictine monk Jacques Winandy.

"When I applied to the colony, Bishop Remi told me that if I was accepted he would ordain me and he was true to his word," the soft-spoken Brandt recalls.

"It took a lot of courage for him to do that," said Brandt, who became the first hermit-priest ordained in the Catholic church in two centuries.

After about five years at the Tsolem River site, the group of seven hermits decided to go separate ways.

"It just got to be too much of a community," said Brandt, who was the procurator or business manager for the group.

"We had a communal car and other things that belonged to the group and we found that too much of our time was spent dealing with those things.

"That wasn't our calling and we felt we had to find a way to lead a simpler, more contemplative life."

For Brandt that meant finding the property along the Oyster River, and moving the small cabin he had built at the initial site to the new location.

Part of the rules of being a hermit, Brandt said, include having to build your own dwelling.

"I didn't know anything about building but I got a book and figured things out," he said of the sturdy little structure that has been his home since the mid-'60s.

The original dwelling comprises a simple living area/kitchen with a bathroom and a small chapel where he meditates and takes communion daily. The front porch overlooks bubbling rapids about 30 metres below.

Having satisfied the hermit requirements by building his basic dwelling, a recent two-storey addition, done by a local contractor houses a bright, efficient workshop for his book restoration, a darkroom for his nature photography and — upstairs — a library/study area and his bedroom.

The book restoration satisfies another requirement,



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Brandt works on his book restorations.

which is to be self-supporting. As a hermit his contact with people is limited, but unlike some orders of monks, his life is not solitary.

He has a television and a telephone and does his writing on a computer, although there is no fax or Internet hookup.

He conducts mass at St. Patrick's church in Campbell River once a month and every other Saturday he holds small meditation classes at his hermitage.

There are also occasional visitors in connection with his clerical duties, his extensive ecological work and his counselling of others who may be seeking the contemplative life.

But his days are usually quiet, with mornings spent with books, in meditation, prayer and celebration of the mass. A daily ramble through the 12.1-hectare property is a must, with time to contemplate nature, and man's place in it.

Afternoons are spent restoring books, in more meditation, correspondence and other writing and the daily chores that must be done to sustain life and maintain property.

There may also be time for fly fishing for Brandt,

for years a friend and companion to renowned B.C. naturalist and fisherman Roderick Haig-Brown and his wife, Anne.

But despite its richness, his life can be lonely too, like that of just about everyone, he said.

"At some times there is a terrible emptiness," Brandt said.

"But at other times there's a tremendous fullness, and I think that life is like that for everyone, a series of peaks and valleys. But it's very fulfilling."

He also said that there are many people who pursue a solitary life.

"Lots of people have a solitary vocation, they just don't realize it," he said.

"I think there are a lot of natural hermits on these islands, artists and writers and so on who are happiest when they're alone, creating."

Brandt's future pursuits were shaped as a child when he was growing up on the outskirts of Kansas City, Miss.

"One of my childhood heroes was Henry David Thoreau and that fostered my interest in nature and in solitary pursuits," Brandt said.

"And as a Boy Scout, one of the things I learned was about book binding. Of course I went on to study it in Europe, but that was the foundation of my vocation."

After serving as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force in the Second World War, Brandt trained as a biologist at Cornell University.

He then was ordained as an Anglican priest, and lived in a religious community in England before returning to the U.S. and converting to Catholicism.

"I wanted a solitary life and there was nothing like that available in the Episcopal Church (U.S. Anglican)."

Brandt, who has two brothers and three sisters, said his conversion was difficult for his parents to accept, but said that his parents were on hand in 1965 when he was ordained a Catholic priest.

He also credited his mother with giving him the strength to pursue his goals.

"This is a woman who at age 71 went back to university and earned a bachelor's degree in English literature," Brandt said. "I think that shows a remarkable level of commitment."•

He also said he finds no contradiction between his training and work as a priest and his training and work as a scientist.

"I think that right now we are in between stories."

He said the old story of Creation and the new scientific model both start with a beginning, move cohesively toward the present and offer a future that is not just physical, but spiritual as well.

He cited a growing group of leading physicists who speak of a "spiritual dimension to the universe and how it's all connected."

"We are seeing that the communities of science and religion are coming together."